

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

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INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL
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**C = CHRISTOPH STROBEL
O = OSVALDA RODRIGUES**

Tape 08.43

C: I am talking right now to Oswalda Rodrigues at MAPS here in Lowell. Can you talk a little bit about MAPS as an organization? First what your location is.

O: We are located at 11 Mill Street in Lowell in the heart of the Portuguese community. It is also known as the Back Central Neighborhood. Back Central, at one time was known as the Portuguese Community. In the past few years a lot of other people have moved in so it is not so much Portuguese anymore. MAPS, we have been here in Lowell for ten years. We just celebrated our tenth anniversary this year. We had a big party. MAPS has been around for over thirty years, but in Lowell for the last ten years. It was a group of Portuguese people that invited us to come in, saying that there was a fairly large Portuguese community here, in need of social services and some advocacy representation. I have been here for about nine years and as Director of the Lowell Office for six years. I am not very good at keeping track of time but about that. What we do is we are a private non-profit organization and our mission is to create access and break barriers to education, social and health services. We do that to provide an education, economic, development and advocacy. We provide direct services. One of the programs is the immigrant case workers program where a person comes in with any kind of issue. Most of them are due to language barriers and they will come in. The Portuguese that come in mostly tend to be the elderly. Although in the last couple of years we have seen younger people come in for different issues. We have been recognized as knowledgeable on issues. People that come in and ask for directions, assistance, or if they have a problem; younger people want to know how to deal with this; can you help us here or if not where can you direct us. We find ourselves building a lot of bridges. We try to provide the services here. If not, which is the case many times; we will direct the person

to other resources in the community. We know who else speaks Portuguese so we send them there. If not we will make sure that the person leaves with some kind of answer. That can be anything from reading a letter, call a doctor to fill a prescription or it can also be for much more complex problems. Family problems, immigration problems, problems with the kids, school problems, work related issues. So things get very complicated. We deal a lot with legal services. That is one in a nutshell. Then we have a very strong domestic violence program. That is fairly new here – it's about two years old. That is big and very very strong. And what we do is we provide services to the victims or develop safety plans for them. Connect them to housing, any public benefits that they might need or are entitled to; to legal services, might they need a divorce. We go with them to get restraining orders, child custody all of these things that are related to domestic violence. In addition to that, we do a lot of education and awareness, because in our community we still often think of domestic violence as just physical abuse. They do not see it as emotional or controlling or financial abuse. A lot of education we do so that the woman can begin to realize that they are being controlled and being victims. That program has grown quite a bit. To that we have a support group where the woman come in and just sit around and talk to other woman who might be in the same situation. We also have HIV aids funded programs which is for women's health education, to educate women and prevent HIV Aids and STDs. That is also a pretty big program. That takes us everywhere because we do outreach where we think women will be at risk. Lots of bars and Portuguese speaking establishments.... It is a pretty large program. We work very closely with the Lowell Community Health Center. The Center comes in here and we call it a health fair where we do testing for diabetes, blood pressure and HIV. So that attracts a lot of people and people know that this takes place. They look forward to it because everything is free and totally confidential. It is done by the clinic so they know it is professionally done. So it is another way of calling people in and making them aware. Not only to be tested but also to show people how to access health care, where to go if they need to go and also about insurance plans and all of that. We just talk about insurance and how to access health care. We just got a grant; we will be enrolling people in health plans.

C: Is that with Massachusetts now requiring health insurance?

O: Yes, as a result of that. Another one is citizenship. For people who are eligible for citizenship, those who have been here for five years or longer with a green card. They can apply for citizenship, so not only do we fill out the applications with them; we also get them ready for the whole process. We have classes get them ready for the interview for the swearing in. So the whole nine yards from the day they apply to the day they become a citizen; we work with them. Another one that we have out of this office is a big contract we have with DSS, the Department of Social Services where they have a Portuguese speaking family and they will refer the family to us so that we can work with the family in their own language and have some sensitivity to their culture. That keeps us very busy. That is not only in Lowell but we cover a very large area – Boston, northeast, and northwest... all over the place. We have other programs going on at night. It is mostly women's groups and based on what we see as being the need for the community.

Depression is big in our community. We attract women so that they do not feel isolated. The age varies.

C: So you have them from really young age to?

O: Fortunately not so young. Every once in a while we have a youth program funded by the United Way of the Merrimack Valley. But that is short term. It is just to keep the kids off the streets. We haven't had a youth program for quite awhile. That is something we are constantly looking for funding. It is hard to get, as you know, there is not much funding available, especially for after school programs. So we have a curriculum in place and we keep on just sending out proposals and hopefully something will come in, because we do have very specific needs that we need to address.

C: I should point out that MAPS is not only for Portuguese and Portuguese Americans but it is an organization for Portuguese speakers. So that includes the islanders but also people from Brazil.

O: Yes, for example when I say that the Portuguese here in Lowell, they are mostly from the (???).... Mostly from one island... that is [of course] generalizing because we do have people from the mainland but mostly from (??). And mostly we have the Brazilians which we estimate to be about eight thousand. Portuguese are about seven thousand and that is an estimate. It's hard to really prove it. It's about fifteen thousand Portuguese speakers. Programs are all combined. There is nothing just for the Portuguese or the Brazilians.

C: What are the relationships between... do you see tensions between the Brazilians and the Portuguese or where there more tensions in the past? Is it better now?

O: As an agency, once it is in here; no we don't notice any tension. But it something that we are always aware of and we work very hard at. The staff is very representative of the community. It is just about half and half; half Portuguese and half Brazilian. At first you have a case worker that is Brazilian and the elderly Portuguese are coming in and are kind of like "don't you have someone that speaks Portuguese?" "No we all speak Portuguese." "No, someone from my country".... We are all here for the same purpose. The mission is the same. This is who we have, equally qualified. We are all here for the same thing. We don't look at color, ethnicity; so it is just an education process. We did at first see some kind of resistance. They would not say it to the staff but make comments to me as the director. But I think it is like everything else, when you do a good job; it is word of mouth. It takes one or two people to come in; "you know we like her"... "not bad".... That kind of thing.... I think it is the work environment that you create and an atmosphere of mutual respect, that helps to overcome things. We are not here to deal with politics or past history between the Portuguese and the Brazilians. Outside I'm sure there are some tensions between both groups; little digs but I say we work well together here. Even outside, the landlords and tenants being from different ethnic groups working side by side and even marriages.

C: There is more that unites than divides.

O: MAPS tries to bring all Portuguese speakers together as one, and have a more active voice. We try to make people understand how much better we are if we just look at ourselves as Portuguese speakers, rather than Portuguese, Brazilians, or Cape Verdeans. That is one of the things we have been able to promote....

C: You talked a little bit about youth programs. What are some of the problems and challenges that you see and some programs that you would like to see funded?

O: As with any program you don't do it because you like it – there has to be a need. We always do a need's assessment. One of the things that we are doing now is that we have some young girls ten to fourteen that come in after school. The program has no funding. It is all voluntary but there are two purposes for it. One is to bring the elderly and the youth together and the other is to see what exactly do young girls need... what kind of orientation, what kind of guidance...and thirdly to keep them off of the street. They come in here once a week and they learn how to sew, crochet, and embroider, which is something that the Portuguese are very proud of and very good at. The older women are usually home and isolated; they will come here in the afternoon and we supply them with the materials they need, and they will teach the girls. Meanwhile you can ask the girls, ask the parents, "what is it that you would like".... Talking with the kids you get to know more about the community and the challenges that these kids face. You get indirectly involved; "how is school going", "what are your goals", "how are you going to get there" or "are you making plans for colleges and what colleges are you going to". By talking and sitting with these kids, I am part of the learning process. You get to know a lot of what is going on. Because these are randomly picked kids and they are from right here in Back Central. We get to know that they are somewhat limited when it comes to their academic expectations. We have lots of kids that have gone to college but it is still not where it should be. So some work has to be done in that area. We need to figure the best way to do that. We do that by having an after school program, and not anything that they would have at the Y, which is very good, and we send our kids there, although they don't usually go. We know the programs. This is a little bit different. Designed with the kid's needs in mind. It is to get parents involved in the child's education. To open more doors and not to clip their wings. We have noticed that a lot of our girls, their wings are clipped and they never think of going anywhere. We love UMass Lowell and it is a great school and I am a graduate but you don't want kids to just think that this is it. It's a great resource; yes, but there is a whole world out there. And the reason the parents immigrated and sometimes the message is more for the parents; the reason we immigrated was for opportunity. And we are really not chasing those opportunities. Instead, we are building these walls.... There is more than Back Central. Walk downtown, because that is outside of the neighborhood. "There are different people down there and those people are crazy." So how do you overcome that so that it is ok for your child to walk there? You don't have to drive her and you don't have to pick her up – it's the same neighborhood. The child is twelve years old. You need to give them the tools they need to be able to live in the city if that is what you decided to do. So that kind of mentality.... Don't protect them so much that when the time comes, they are not prepared to fit in and contribute to society. Take

advantage of this beautiful country. So we see the program as a helpful avenue to careers and colleges. Today's girls are tomorrow's leaders; that kind of thing. So we need to work with the parents so they see the needs for the girls you don't need to be teachers. We need teachers but do you know there are other things out there and not just because it is the only thing we know. Also opening the doors to communicating with UMass Lowell and Middlesex where we can bring the kids and have a mentor program. We are very lucky to have these two great institutions, and we should be working closer together. We see that. The drop-out rate is high. We see kids not going on to higher education. And if you look at it the reasons, they are mostly because the main reason is they don't fit in and why is it that they don't fit in. Getting these kids to fit in, getting the parents to see the need to integrate these kids. It is great to teach our kids about our culture but there is more to it and that is why we came here. Not to have these kids living in what I call a third world that we create; a third culture that really they don't know what it is like to be here, they don't really fit in with the mainstream. So they create this place that only they fit in, which is ok but if that is your whole life you are limiting yourselves and these kids.

C: You can always explore outside and always come back.

O: That is it. You raise your children knowing the values and your culture but let them learn about both. And I think the more you learn about others the more of an appreciation you have and you can choose. And just because it is tradition doesn't mean you have to buy it. There has to be change and you have to be able to make that decision based on what you have learned. So yeah, it's great to know the language but at what expense are you going to learn Portuguese.

C: There is the perception that Back Central is the Portuguese neighborhood and recently Brazilians have moved in. Obviously that is more of an oversimplified picture. Do you feel that this is still a strong image? That people still today connect to this neighborhood? Because I have been asking, for example, Cambodians in the Highlands, because I live just two blocks away from Cupples Square, which is one of those central points for the Cambodians. Do you feel that for Portuguese speakers the Back Central area is a strong point? Because when I talk to Cambodians and maybe it's just the nature of the people I talked to, they don't necessarily see the Highlands as a strong neighborhood even though there is a strong Cambodian presence there.

O: Yes and no. Yes because we have a lot of Portuguese establishments. So if you want to go to a Portuguese store, you come here. The church is here. We are here. The clubs are here. We have two clubs, the restaurants. They are all here. So yes, in that sense you come here. Is it as Portuguese as it was at one time? No, not as much... since I have been here I have seen the change because there are different people and a lot of people have moved out.

C: Where are they moving to? Just the area suburbs?

O: Yes.

C: Any reason why that is?

O: A couple of reasons. One is that at one time, I'm not sure of the time but I am going to say about ten years or eleven or twelve years ago I guess the crime in this area was pretty high and people started to move out. The ones that stayed behind were mostly the elderly. They opened a precinct here in Back Central. It took a while but things are not as bad as things use to be. It is pretty safe neighborhood to be around. I feel pretty safe here. Also, as with any ethnic group – a lot of people stay behind but also people like to move out. We kind of want to get more integrated into mainstream.... We want to give our kids... sometimes it right, sometimes it's not... an education... and some people move out for that reason. Jobs sometimes drive people. But I think it mostly took place when crime was up.

C: Some of the social programs you mention really have to do with family structures and you talked a little bit about it. But I would like you to elaborate.... What are some of the intergenerational issues that you see, some of the issues of family composition? Because I think they are not... Some of the issues you are raising are not necessarily problems for Portuguese speaking people alone. You see that in all communities.

O: I don't know how unique it is to the Portuguese community. It is probably not unique... But in the Portuguese [community] you find a lot of the grandparents taking care of the children. They are being very protective of the children. Usually they live around the area and it's easy. The kids come home from school and they stay at the grandparents' house. The grandparents watch the kids and it sounds like a perfect situation – problem solved. It is great. No doubt our kids are physically protected. Compared to national and state statistics abuse in our children is not so high. But we have a tendency to look at it as the physical well-being of a child and for us here it is not so much the physical. It is the whole entire package. We feel that our grandparents are taking very good care of our kids. But they have a tendency, and this is not just to the Portuguese, . . . to raise your grandchildren the way you raised your children and the way you know how to raise children. Most Portuguese have been here for forty, fifty maybe even more years. The way they were brought up that place doesn't exist anymore. Most of our elderly don't speak English which is not a bad thing. It is a great thing to teach your kids Portuguese and the best way to teach a child a second language is to immerse them in that language. So the fact that they are speaking Portuguese to the kids all the time, it is a wonderful thing. If the kids go home and they are speaking English it's wonderful. However, let's face it our grandparents didn't go to school to raise kids to be bilingual and bicultural. They themselves never assimilated to this country. So there are conflicts with culture and we see that interfering in the developments sometimes of social skills of the child. The kids in Back Central stay at home because it is safe. You don't go play outside because you might scrap a knee. Well it's ok. That's how you grow up. You might play with the kids that are not from our group and you might get some crazy ideas so let's protect our children. You know what happens when kids come home. Let's face it. Its apartments here, with two and three deckers small confined places. Kids come home and what do they do. They sit and watch TV and eat junk food. Some of these grandparents may have a computer but the chances are very slim. The kids are glued to

the TV eating junk foods. And it is “healthy” to be a little bit chunky. We know health wise that it is not healthy. Kids have a tendency to be a little bit on the heavy side. So there are health issues alongside the fact kids are not being intellectually challenged. On TV they are not doing anything but sitting there and they are not taking advantage of after school programs and after school activities. They are not involved. If you are a boy maybe you play some soccer. The girls are too but it is very protected. That and you come home. You participate in the sport but then you come home; you are not allowed to hangout. So it creates a very protective environment that is really not challenging or developing them to be ready to go on to college, to fit in, and be active in school or to be outspoken. You see that. We would like to, when working with families, to bring in some training for these families, for the grandparents at home to be able to provide daycare services for these kids. Training on how to engage children in reading a book.... Some of the grandparents, not all, do not read themselves. Thinking that they are doing a good job, bringing up their kids with the same values that they brought their kids up with fifty years ago. They were good at the time but they don’t apply in today’s society. So we do see that conflict, and that is the reason we would like to bring kids in, and through the kids reach the parents because if you just go out there and start saying we need to do this it is not going to work.

C: Of course the parents have to rely on both mother’s and father’s salaries.

O: And also thinking that it is best for the kids.... It is not just a choice of economics but also because they believe it is the best thing for the kids.... Nobody can take care of my child the same way as my mother, true, but at what expense....What is the long term effect on these kids.... Are you creating walls for yourself?

C: There is the so called blue club and the red club after the soccer teams. Are they exclusively Portuguese, or are the Brazilians welcome there too?

O: I am not really sure. I think they go, because I do see some there. As far as Board of Directors, or anything, I believe you have to be Portuguese. They are very strong clubs here and they attract a lot of people. They open on weekends and people go there. They provide food, entertainment. It is a place where people go to socialize. It is packed on weekends.

C: What role does religion play in the Portuguese and Brazilian community?

O: When it comes to religion, Portuguese and Brazilians are very different. Portuguese are still traditional Catholics. You are a catholic, you were born a catholic and you will die a catholic, and generations to come will be catholic. Church is big. Church is the center of Back Central – St. Anthony Church on Central Street! A lot of activities that take place in the neighborhood are influenced by the church. The Holy Ghost which is an association and a park that we have right off of route 38. It is somewhat affiliated with the church and it also provides a great source of social activities for the community on weekends. There is also Seven Day Advents church that is Portuguese. But everything

else is Catholic. I don't know what the membership is for the Seven Day Adventist is but it is minimal. But there are a lot of Brazilian Evangelical churches.

C: I know the Pentecostal Church has been growing very strongly globally in Africa but also in Latin America. Is that one of the churches that is active in Lowell too?

O: Yes... without exaggeration, there is probably fifteen different Evangelical churches from Baptist, to Presbyterian, to Pentecostal, to Assembly of God, to just about every denomination you can think of. The Brazilian Catholic church is also very big.

C: Do you think among the Brazilians the switch to Protestantism is something that has happened in the United States or had that already happened before people came?

O: Brazil is a catholic country but Evangelical churches are growing there at a very rapid speed, faster than any other place in the world. In Lowell to some Brazilians are turning Evangelical.... You can see why.... People come here from Brazil and they don't necessarily have family here. So it is a social support network and you create a family through the church. Christmas, if you don't have a family where do you spend Christmas? Church provides that, dinner and parties, you get to know each other, you develop relationships. The church in addition to spiritual growth provides that kind of social support. We don't ask, but if we were to ask, we would probably see half and half; half Catholic and half evangelical.

C: I have been reading that a lot of Brazilians are leaving Massachusetts. I think it is a nation wide trend because of the weak dollar, the improving economy in Brazil... that they are just deciding to leave the United States to go back to Brazil. Do you notice that?

O: We have noticed some of that and I know you are probably referring to the article in the Boston Globe. We talked about it amongst ourselves and it seems to be a little bit high. I think they inflated those numbers.

C: So you think that is exaggerated?

O: Yes. Every Christmas time people go back to Brazil. This year it was higher than before. We do notice speaking to some business owners that they say yes, I did lose some of my staff going back. A lot of it was due to the immigration law that didn't go through...it was kind of a disappointment.... The value of the dollar is low. The economy in Brazil... we really don't know the economy in Brazil? It could be we are sending a lot of money. We know that families here leave families behind so a lot of dollars are going there. If everybody goes back, Brazil won't have the dollar going there. So it is hard to measure. But I am sure that all of these factors have influenced the decision of some to go back. One of the people who participated in writing the article, was going to travel agents seeing how many people bought one way tickets. If you look at it that is a good idea but we also know that working with the community that every year people buy one way tickets going there. They stay there a month or two months and then they buy the ticket there when the price go down to come back the U.S. To a certain extent it is a measuring

tool but it is not a solid tool. People do that... they wait until they get there and the price goes down and they buy the ticket to come back. We think the estimates were a little too high. Going through our offices, we did not see a decrease in our numbers at all, but also that is not reflective too, because the one's that come here are the ones in need and not ready to go back.

C: It was something I have been reading about and I was wondering.

O: A lot of people are talking about it. In talking to businesses that employ a lot of Brazilian people, they say that some have left and are not coming back. At least the intent is not to come back. So there are some. But to what extent we really don't know.

C: Is MAPS involved with some of the festivals, like the Holy Ghost Festival?

O: No, we are not because we are really not a cultural agency and also because the Holy Ghost is somewhat connected to religion and we don't mix the two. We sometimes set up informational tables....

C: Beyond the churches do you do some collaborative work with the Portuguese Club?

O: Yes and No. Unfortunately funding is tight as you know. And funding does not allow you to spend money as you would like to. We don't have a lot of flexibility. So, yes, we do, but once in a while not often enough. That is something we want to do, yes. But there is no funding, and we are all already overworked here.... You cannot provide a service to the community without being involved in the community... but it is very hard to balance that. Where do you spend your time? Obviously the people that provide funding want answers, and we have to provide numbers otherwise you don't get future funding. Also you cannot provide services unless you know the community that you are working with. Do we do enough in the area being involved with the Portuguese community – no... but it is just not doable. It is after work hours, you have families. But we are involved in other areas. The day of Portugal, we send staff to be part of that committee that puts it together. Brazilian Day, September 7, we have staff that is involved, but it is more of a way of promoting our culture and having everyone to get to know what kind of services we provide. We...did a need's assessment of the Portuguese community. It was actually funded by Middlesex Community College and they are the ones who did the research for us. What would you like most in the Portuguese community? And it became clear that we needed a place where seniors could go because there are a large number of seniors left in Back Central. So with that in mind we started looking for funding, working with elderly services, writing funds, connecting and bringing community people together, and it was great work for community building. We came together with some Portuguese business people, who were ready to invest some money, and one of the clubs came forward and opened their doors. It has a beautiful kitchen, and we would pay them, and they would prepare the meals. Most of the money came from private funding. It was great, because when we first opened we thought maybe thirty people [would come] and we were hesitant. The first day we had eighty five and the numbers went up to the hundreds. That was three days a week of meals and social activities where the men would play dominos

and cards. The women had an opportunity to bring in their embroidery and their crochets. And reading club, lots of things, dancing, a dance group where they would perform at different activities. That was a true collaboration of the entire community. Then we would have fundraising dinners to support the program and that went well. We did that for two years and then that was the intent. The program was well established and implemented. We really were not needed, it is going so well. We can run on volunteers which was a great way to see the community, how they appreciated the whole thing and how they were willing to give their time and money to it. They really believed it was a good thing. The seniors loved it and everyone was happy. And then we said ok, we really loved it, I loved it. It was something where you could see instant results. Most programs take time. You can see the happiness and it is changing lives. And people saying, "I never saw my mother so happy. She even dresses up to go to the center. She used to be in the house in her coat the whole day." It was very satisfying. So they decided to keep it running by volunteers and not longer had a paid staff person from us. So we are no longer involved with them and it is still going. I don't think it is at the same level. It doesn't attract as many people. You don't mind when you create something and step back and pray that it keeps going. After all that is what we are about; community development and growth and that certainly worked. I know the other club approached us to do something with kids. "Could we do something where we have computers... we know you guys had a computer lab. Could we do something similar over here?" Not only for the kids but also to bring the parents in... so, yes we can but it is always the funding.

C: How do you see power and politics in town? Do you feel like the Portuguese speakers are getting their share of fair representation?

O: Unfortunately, no. And it is not just for the Portuguese speakers... but all the different ethnic groups. There is not enough representation and I don't think it is anyone's fault. We can't really blame mainstream because they do open doors. I don't think we are at that level for a number of reasons. Talking about the Portuguese from Portugal... we didn't vote. When these people came here forty or fifty years ago; you didn't vote. We were oppressed politically. You wouldn't dare to speak up because it could be very dangerous if you did. So you just came home, and closed your door, and you went about your business.

C: Was this because of the fascist regime there?

O: Yes... you can't change that in one generation change that mentality. It takes a while. Here in Lowell we had someone that ran for the school committee but there is nobody else. That is one of the things we would like to do, is to prepare for leadership, but it takes a while. Could the city help? I'm sure they can help in some way. I can't blame them, and it's not to say they are making it very easy for anybody to run.... But yeah, I think there are two sides. We need to do a lot of development, and get people geared up for that. And have the next generation truly believe that they can make a difference, that we are responsible, that we need to stay in the city and make some changes. You start that by getting people to register to vote. That is a struggle right there, because many think they can't make a difference....

C: I would like to talk a little about the Lowell Historical National Park. Part of the study is to figure out ways to get the park closer to the various ethnic communities in town. Do you feel like the relationship between the park and the Portuguese community could be better?

O: I would like to see us use the park more. I know that the park has opened quite a few doors for us. We have had a few exhibits there. I know in the summer time we had the Portuguese seniors go on tours there, but it was planned by us. I would like to see the Portuguese, on a Sunday afternoon, to go to a museum or take advantage of the concerts they have there. Why doesn't it happen? It could be again that there are so many activities going on in Back Central... the Portuguese community provides so much that I don't see people going outside of that. That is something we would like to break away from. We want people to know the history of Lowell... be part of it. We want people to be more involved in what is going on. Even when we put exhibits on down there the turnout is low. Why? It's not that far. I don't know. I guess it's a process and we need to work on that. There is an educational component to that. You need to get involved.... You need to know about your city, and how you can contribute and contributed to it in the past... the part that the Portuguese played in that. How you contributed to the economy of Lowell, to the growth of Lowell. It is a lot of factors. It is the same thing as being politically oppressed in your own country, that you wouldn't dare to speak up.... If the Brazilians were to stay around a bit longer I don't think that it would be the same thing. They are more outgoing, more resourceful. They would make sure that they are part of the history. I think that is one of the major differences between the two cultures.

C: Thank you so much for taking an hour out of your busy day and talking to me. I really appreciate it.